
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

SE News
HD **As the Greens surge in polls, May remains confident in her unscripted style**
BY By ADAM RADWANSKI
CR Staff
WC 2,040 words
PD 29 July 2019
SN The Globe and Mail
SC GLOB
ED Ontario
PG A1
LA English
CY ©2019 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.

LP

When Elizabeth May takes the stage in the leaders' debates of the coming election campaign, she will be viewed as more of a serious contender than at any other point in her dozen-plus years at the helm of the Green Party of Canada.

But that doesn't mean she's about to prepare for the occasion the way most other party leaders do.

TD

"Noooooooo," she replied, drawing out the word in apparent horror, when asked whether she would practise with predebate simulations, alongside stand-ins for her opponents. "God no!"

Instead, she'll ready herself the way she usually does – alone, studying her files "like I'm cramming for an exam." Not for her, prepared responses or attack lines carefully crafted with her team. "I'm a sort of in the moment, good on my feet kind of person."

It was a response in keeping with the general impression Ms. May gave, during an interview while passing through Toronto recently on her pre-election tour, of how she intends to approach the biggest opportunity in her party's history.

The more she spoke – delivering long and thoughtful, if sometimes meandering, answers after a downtown event with her party's local candidates, as her chief of staff intermittently turned up to warn that she was in danger of missing her commercial flight – the clearer it was that she remains unwilling, or unable, to follow much of the orthodoxy about running campaigns in this country.

And so the Greens are left to hope that her approach is better suited to the current political climate than in past elections, when she led them to no more than a single seat nationally.

After the last of those previous campaigns, in 2015, it would have been difficult to imagine that Ms. May would ever have a chance to make her party something more than a fringe player in Ottawa.

The Greens' share of the popular vote went down slightly from the election four years earlier, to just 3.4 per cent, with the centre-left having rallied behind Justin Trudeau's Liberals. Within her party, there was grumbling that while Ms. May had proven effective at getting herself into the House of Commons and establishing a reputation as a good parliamentarian, she wasn't achieving much else.

Now, the Greens are experiencing what Ms. May can credibly describe as a “groundswell” amid double-digit national poll numbers, a recent federal by-election win in British Columbia, for a total of two seats in the House of Commons, and seat pickups in provincial elections in British Columbia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. It's not outside the realm of possibility that they will supplant Jagmeet Singh's struggling NDP as the primary left-of-centre alternative to a Liberal government with which many progressives are already disillusioned, in an election in which environmental issues – specifically climate change – will be top of mind.

There is no way, though, for the Greens to try to make good on that prospect the way a more established party would. Despite recently fundraising at a record pace by their standards (nearly \$800,000 in 2019's first quarter,) they still don't have the financial capacity to run a truly national campaign, in terms of advertising or voter contact. Nor do they have many staff or volunteers with winning campaign experience. What resources they do have will largely be directed toward a few ridings – mostly on Vancouver Island, home to both of their current seats, and pockets where they have made their provincial gains.

That leaves hopes for a breakthrough resting heavily on the ability of Ms. May to break through a crowded news cycle and seize voters' attention – and depending more on her idiosyncratic instincts than the sort of disciplined messaging, research-tested to appeal to target voters, upon which another leader in her shoes might rely.

It's not a matter of laziness: Ms. May describes herself as “fairly maniacal about preparation,” a self-assessment backed up by her tendency to spit out facts and figures, as well as her reputation for micromanaging her party's behind-the-scenes operations. But her aversion to anything that might take her out of the moment, she makes clear, goes beyond the leaders' debates and into every campaign appearance.

“Nobody has ever tried to script me,” she said. “It wouldn't stick. One of the things I hate about politicians, I shouldn't say I hate things, but one of the things I hate about politics is people who repeat the same talking point over and over and over again. Now, I can see why people do that, because I'll get attacked for something that's nuanced ...” “I am absolutely determined not to get put into a box where I'm in a bulletproof sound bite that's so narrow that it excludes the possibility of thought. So I am difficult that way for my team.”

In worst-case scenarios, that message freelancing leads her down some credibility-sapping paths – her infamously bad attempts at humour during a Parliamentary Press Gallery dinner, for instance, or her initial support for Jian Ghomeshi when the former CBC host was fired over sexual-misconduct allegations.

But even assuming that she is too sharp for such missteps in the heat of an election campaign, her insistence on winging it is a very big gamble, especially because of a couple of challenges with which she is grappling heading into this election.

The more obvious of those is taking attention-grabbing positions that break through to progressive voters weary of more traditional options, without veering far enough from the mainstream to scare some of them off or be tuned out.

Climate change, the issue around which her party naturally now revolves, presents a particularly tricky balancing act. Ms. May is trying to convey that extraordinarily high stakes are not being taken sufficiently seriously by other parties – in the interview she described the situation as “an existential threat” and said it requires a “Churchill at Dunkirk” moment – without veering into an offputting degree of doom and gloom.

At the same time, she is trying to convey optimism about how swiftly the battle can be fought – a 60-per-cent reduction from 2005 emission levels by 2030, through everything from an end to fossilfuel power generation to ensuring every new car is electric – without sounding Pollyanna-ish or suggesting an unpalatable degree of economic upheaval.

She is not alone in trying to strike that balance. The insurgent left flank of the U.S. Democrats – whose “Green New Deal” language, around marrying environmental and economic goals, Ms. May has borrowed in her “Mission: Possible” climatechange document setting the various targets to reach in the next decade – is attempting the same thing. But she may be lonely on this side of the border, trying to sort through it without relying much on a broader infrastructure around her.

But the challenge with which Ms. May is even more visibly grappling, and that really cuts to the heart of her unique political identity, is how aggressively to campaign against other party leaders – especially Mr. Trudeau.

In past elections, she has gained a reputation (particularly among Conservatives) for being too soft on the Liberals, and she now doesn't entirely disagree. "I may have been," she interjected midway through a question that started with that premise.

She paints herself as being among those disillusioned with the Prime Minister, particularly because of his abandoned promise of electoral reform (which might have made it easier for parties such as hers to compete) and repeatedly invokes his government's "cognitive dissonance" in simultaneously declaring a climate emergency and buying an oil pipeline.

"I believed Justin Trudeau in 2015," she said. "I thought he would be a climate leader. I was wrong."

This time, she suggests, she won't be afraid of pulling votes away from the Liberals, in ways that could inadvertently help the Conservatives win government instead. Never mind that Andrew Scheer's party has a more modest emissions-reduction plan than Mr. Trudeau's, vowing to roll back carbon pricing that she supports.

The bar now, she says, is not just doing more than the Tories would, but doing Canada's part to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 C over preindustrial levels, which the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported last year is necessary to avert catastrophe. Since the Liberals are failing to achieve that, her argument goes, voters need to elect enough Green MPs to force the issue in a minority Parliament, whichever other party winds up with the most seats.

Levelling harsh criticism at Mr. Trudeau, though, will never be her comfort zone – and it shows. Asked in the interview whether she believes the PM could still prove a global climate leader after all, she responded in the affirmative. "I know him as a friend, and I know Sophie," she said. As the father of three children, the PM surely is moved by climate science, which she thinks he "actually understands" more not just than Mr. Scheer, but also Mr. Singh. At another point, discussing social policy, she said that she "shouldn't mention how much I like JeanYves Duclos," the member of Mr. Trudeau's cabinet responsible for much of it, before describing him as "brilliant on everything."

Ms. May's generosity toward her political rivals isn't always limited to the Liberals. While professing faith in being able to eventually achieve cross-party consensus on climate action, she described MPs of every stripe as "all her friends," and said she will do her best to address both the good and the bad of every other party's offerings. But such assessments are still likeliest to raise eyebrows when it comes to the current government, as when she gave Mr. Trudeau credit for reducing the power of the Prime Minister's Office so that "individual cabinet ministers have more control of their own portfolios" – a view not everyone in Ottawa would share.

"I'm fair-minded, maybe," she said.

"Maybe I bend over backward to give people too much benefit of the doubt. And I'll give credit where credit is due."

It's not exactly the outsider pitch that many leaders of a party that has never been anywhere close to power would make. But the bet for the Greens, in this election, is that they can capitalize on voters' frustration – with the general tone of politics in Ottawa, or with the pace of change on climate policy – by pitching collaboration more than confrontation.

Rather than counting on proving her rivals wrong, as most politicians try to do, Ms. May seems to be banking on voters appreciating her attempts to make everyone else be right. Elect enough Greens, she suggests, and the first thing they'll do is push for the next Parliament to begin (before the Speech from the Throne) with "days or even weeks" of scientists appearing before the entire House of Commons for a climate-change education session, so that everyone inches closer to consensus.

Not coincidentally, it's a strategy that fits neatly with the style that seemingly comes naturally to her – the one that will have her on the debate stage trying to prove herself the reasonable one, actually trying to answer each question without a script, absent industry-standard preparation to elevate herself above the others.

After the election, her party may be left to wonder if it would have been better off with someone more strident, like the green progressives south of the border. Or someone who had been committed to the professionalization of their party, the way Jack Layton did before the 2011 NDP breakthrough that the

Greens dream of echoing. Or just someone more inclined to adapt to this window of opportunity by presenting a 2.0 version of herself.

But first, Ms. May will get her best chance to prove that her way works. She will approach it in characteristic form, and hope that what the country wants from its politicians has changed, more than she has.

NS gpol : Domestic Politics | gcat : Political/General News | npag : Page-One Stories | gpir : Politics/International Relations | ncat : Content Types

RE ottaw : Ottawa | cana : Canada | caon : Ontario | namz : North America

PUB The Globe and Mail Inc.

AN Document GLOB000020190729ef7t00019

Search Summary

Text	"climate" AND "doom"
Date	20180101 to 20231231
Source	The Globe and Mail (Canada)
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English
Results Found	45
Timestamp	16 May 2023 10:01 AM